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BECOMING BRITISH

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UK CITIZENSHIP EXAMINED

THOM BROOKS

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INTRODUCTION

Citizenship matters. Only a country's citizens can enjoy the full rights of their shared political membership. To be a citizen is to have the most fundamental rights – or, as the philosopher Hannah Arendt said, 'a right to have rights.' The right to live in a state permanently, the right to vote and the right to run for elected office are a small handful of wide-ranging privileges that individuals have as citizens. But it is even more than that. Being a citizen is about belonging to a community.

It can be easy to overlook how important our citizenship is to us. Emily is a young woman living in London and building a successful career in the media industry. I asked her what being British meant to her and she said, 'I'm afraid I take British citizenship very much for granted.' Emily understood its significance

and she is ‘hugely grateful’ for it. However, it is not something you merely *think* about; it is just something you *are*.

Her reply to my question is what most citizens born British say to me. Becoming British is something that just happens – and something we might not notice about ourselves. It’s an achievement of birth to British parents on native soil. No application, no tests and nothing more – and easy to take for granted. Emily’s path to becoming British is a simple one. A journey made by no more than showing up. Being British requires little effort for the great majority of British citizens.

Not everyone is this lucky. Tracy is a solicitor in the south-west and came to the UK from the United States. Tracy faced several hurdles in her path. She told me that British lawyers at her firm didn’t know the answers to the British citizenship test she was required to pass. Tracy thought some of the obstacles she confronted served no purpose other than to make the process of her becoming British look legitimate and it was ‘a relief to get it over with’.

Migrants like Tracy are part of a growing number of people who become British through *naturalisation*. But don’t let the name fool you – there’s little ‘natural’ about it. Naturalisation is a process where migrants are forced to jump through increasingly difficult hoops. These can change so quickly they challenge the most learned lawyer and politician. And the only thing growing as fast as the hurdles is the application costs. Naturalising is becoming British the hard way, where some of the rules may seem ‘unnatural’

and maybe a touch un-British as some migrants find they have more hurdles to jump than others to become fellow citizens.

Citizens are equals. But how they become citizens can vary enormously. The UK is made up of many citizens like Emily who are British from birth and a growing number like Tracy who had to pass several tests as a migrant. This means there can be no avoiding the significance of immigration, and different ideas about who should and who should not – or must not – be able to become a British citizen are central to any discussion.

British citizenship is no less controversial for the fact that defining what ‘Britishness’ is has proved so difficult. You need only turn on your telly or see tabloid headlines to confirm that how citizens are *becoming British* is a crucial issue of our time. Migration is about crossing territorial borders, but British citizenship is about crossing civic boundaries, recognising others as equals. This raises some fundamental questions about being British. What is Britishness? Can it be tested? Should new citizens integrate with current citizens? How important is knowing English? Does any of this matter?

This book explores the big questions the public often asks but which are rarely answered by politicians, their special advisors or anyone else. UK citizenship has undergone substantial changes, and a clear, up-to-date examination of what it involves, of who can become British and on what terms, is long overdue.

I explain the immigration problems that modern UK citizenship law and policy were meant to solve, what the major

challenges are today and how they should be met. While immigration of both temporary and permanent residents receives widespread attention, much less time is devoted to the major increase in the number of British citizens and how this might be managed better. This book fills this crucial gap and redresses the balance.

I know about becoming British for a simple reason – I did it. I became British. Been there, done that, got the T-shirt. Like Tracy, I am also an immigrant to the UK. Originally from the US state of Connecticut, I spent two years in Ireland before moving to the UK in 2001. I've called Britain my home for fifteen years and became a UK citizen in 2011. I do not merely know how Britain's complex immigration system and citizenship rules work; I experienced them first-hand from applicant to citizen. I know about becoming British because I became British – with a lot of paperwork and receipts to prove it.

A few words about the chapters that follow. *Becoming British* covers the main issues – from the background to Britishness and the citizenship test, to the EU, family life, asylum and much more. This book begins with the crucial background so often neglected concerning where we are today and how we got there. Chapter 1 looks at rising immigration to the United Kingdom, providing an overview for the growing numbers becoming British and the challenges successive governments have faced to manage access to citizenship. Chapter 2 examines the shift from subject to citizen that has revolutionised how becoming British works,

with lasting – and surprising – effects as a once global power began to shrink. Chapter 3 considers the question of Britishness and the many frustrated attempts at defining what it is. These chapters set the scene for the rest of the book.

Next, the book reveals the facts behind the myths and misunderstandings. Chapter 4 discusses how to test for ‘Britishness’ and focuses on the UK’s citizenship test – which I liken to a bad pub quiz. Sample questions and answers are provided that will make you the envy of any dinner party or social gathering. Chapter 5 is about the English question, or, more exactly, the question of how much English new citizens are expected to know and why. Chapter 6 addresses the free movement myth regarding Britain’s membership of the EU, and how the UK could restrict the movement of EU nationals better if only the government knew how. Chapter 7 is about marriage and the right to family life as pathways to British citizenship. Chapter 8 concerns asylum seekers and refugees and their experience of becoming British. Chapter 9 considers the powers of the Home Secretary to end the citizenship of British nationals and deport them. The final, tenth chapter sets out my recommendations for how British citizenship can be improved and how we can begin the kind of national conversation we need urgently.

This book is informed throughout by the latest research, the current immigration rules and my observations through personal experiences. Immigration is a complex topic and the official guidance can change daily. But this doesn’t mean a book about it

must be unreadable or outdated as soon as it is printed. I believe that British citizens deserve a clear guide that lets everyone see the challenges of British citizenship for what they are in a way most readers can understand – especially if they have not thought much about these issues before. This goes too for people thinking about becoming British: this book is for you both.

I have benefited enormously from speaking to people – hundreds of British citizens past, present and future – across the United Kingdom over the past decade. They come from all walks of life, a myriad of backgrounds. Their stories are messages of the hope, aspiration and belonging as well as the confusion, discrimination and alienation that citizenship in modern Britain means for everyday people. They say much about the Britain we want to be and how we want to get there. Unless otherwise stated, I have disguised the identities of people interviewed out of respect for their privacy. Many of their stories raise deep concerns about the problems current immigration policy brings to bear on real people. I am thankful to them for sharing these often painful stories with me so that they might get the attention of ministers and the wider public about what is actually happening in our country.

I am also very grateful to the ministers, elected MPs, peers and policy advisors who gave their time generously to share insights into key decisions and events that have shaped the evolution of current policy. They have helped broaden and deepen the discussion here by helping to flesh out the thinking behind many of the policies we have today. References for each chapter can be found

in the 'Further reading' section at the end of the book, where supporting evidence for claims made can be found. Those wanting to look into the details should look there.

I began by saying citizenship matters. It does – citizenship is hugely important to everyone from the British citizen wanting to welcome new members to those in favour of tighter restrictions, as well as to those hoping to become British citizens in the future. It's now time to start our journey to see why this is, how it all works and what we can do to improve the system – before it is beyond repair.